

7. Never withdraw love as a way to punish. Children need parents' love, just as they need food and shelter. Your love is the foundation of their emotional growth, their sense of security and self-worth. Let them know you love them all the time, even when you discipline them, even when you are angry with them. You can love them without loving their behavior.

8. Choose disciplinary methods that show your child that every action has consequences. Part of growing up is learning what the consequences of various actions are, and guiding behavior accordingly. Suppose Susy is always late for dinner. You can teach her the logical consequence of being late if you tell her she'll either have to go without dinner on those nights, or else make her own. Another method - for example, grounding her - wouldn't teach her that practical lesson. When children understand how they can create "good" or "bad" consequences for themselves, they will be more responsible in their behavior.

9. Never belittle your child, or use shame or guilt. Those negative techniques will only undermine your child's self worth - the very cornerstone of all future positive behavior. They are actually forms of emotional abuse, and are just as damaging as physical abuse.

10. Don't expect perfection. It's normal for children to misbehave. After all, they are limited by the very fact that they *are* immature! Expect different behavior at the different

stages of child development. At three months Susy may cry a lot. At two, she'll say "no" to everything. At eight she'll be a carbon copy of her best friend, and at fourteen she's likely to stay for hours in her bedroom behind a closed door. Your doctor can suggest books or pamphlets to help you understand those stages better. Remember that unreasonable expectations only cause children to feel they aren't good enough, that they don't measure up. That pressure can lead to frustration, anger, even abuse. Johnny will be pleased with himself when he succeeds in making the kitchen floor sparkling clean. Given some appreciation from you, he's likely to do it again. But if he has to clean the whole house, he'll feel overwhelmed and resentful.

Remember that it's normal for children to misbehave. Then it will be easier for you to accept that you are not your child's opponent; you only maintain the battleground in which the child struggles with himself or herself in the process of growing up.

But if you ever think you're in a situation you can't handle, get help. Talk to your spouse, a friend or neighbor. You can also call a Parental Stressline for telephone assistance. In Milwaukee it is 414-671-0566 and in Madison, 608-241-2221.

If you want professional counseling, call a local social agency or county social services/human services department. If the agency you call doesn't offer the kind of service you want, ask to be referred somewhere else. Help is not far away.



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Plain Talk

About child discipline



“Whack!”

“Johnny! I’ve told you a hundred times not to tease your little sister. Maybe now you’ll stop!”

Johnny stomped sullenly on ahead of his mother and the stroller she was pushing. He caught up with his dad.

“That’s one thing I hate about people.”

“What?”

“They hit you.”

“Only when you do something wrong.”

Unless you are quite unusual, you’ve watched and even been a part of such scenes yourself, either as a child or as an adult, or both.

Of course, we all know what Johnny’s parents wanted to teach him: not to tease his sister, and to obey his parents.

Here’s what he learned instead:

- That he has reason to hate people: They’ll hurt him.
- That he should be especially on guard against getting hurt by the very people who are close to him, who love him.
- That it’s all right for “big people” to hurt “little people.”
- That if he is hurt by a “big” person, it’s a sure sign he has done something wrong. He must be guilty.

It’s clear that Johnny’s parents, well intentioned though they may be, did not teach him what they meant to teach. Instead, they helped breed resentment, anger, guilt and violence in their son’s character. If this is their normal way of dealing with him, he may become withdrawn, suspicious and cold, incapable of giving or receiving love. Given the right circumstances, he could well turn out to be the neighborhood bully, perhaps even a juvenile delinquent. His tough exterior would only hide the hurt and shame of a little boy who knew his spirit was in danger of being broken by those whom he loved and trusted.

This story about unsuccessful and even destructive child discipline is a sad one, but it is all too typical. Fortunately, we can all learn a better way to teach our children discipline.

Why Discipline?

There are two reasons to discipline children. The first is obvious: We need to keep their behavior within certain limits that we, as parents, set; we need to stop their destructive or violent acts. For instance, you cannot allow a toddler to run into the street, a two-year-old to play with grandma’s best vase, a five-year-old to kick you during a temper tantrum, or a teenager to buy things the family can’t afford.

It’s important to set those limits wisely. Otherwise we can find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of defending rules we really don’t believe in or care about. Or (and this is just as bad), we wind up not enforcing the rules at all because even we know they are unreasonable. Then a child discovers that we don’t mean what we say, and therefore we don’t really need to be obeyed.

The second reason to discipline children has to do with a longer term goal, one that is harder to accomplish. That goal is to teach our children to establish their own limits and rules that will spring from the conscience and the heart after we have faded from the picture. In other words, parents are responsible for teaching their children **self-discipline**.

Unfortunately, self-discipline has come to have a negative meaning for many people. They associate it with doing something they don’t really want to do. But true discipline, discipline-that-comes-from-within, is a useful tool that cultivates very pleasurable feelings in us: inner order, calm, a sense of security and direction. It enables us to arrange all the parts of our lives - work, play, health, relationships with family and friends - into a harmonious and pleasing lifestyle. It helps us balance our own needs, rights and desires with those of others. It helps us shape our lives as we please. What a wonderful skill to teach a child!

With these two goals in mind - keeping the child’s behavior within acceptable limits, and teaching the child self-discipline - let’s go back and look at Johnny’s parents again. Did they accomplish the first goal - getting Johnny to stop teasing his sister? Perhaps. But it is quite likely they will only get



temporary cooperation from him. True, he may not tease his sister again while mom and dad are around, but what happens when they turn their backs is probably another story.

And what about their long-range goal - teaching him to love his sister, care about her feelings and safety, and respect her rights? The slap on his behind certainly didn’t help with that. As we have seen, it did not teach him love at all, but resentment, hatred, fear and avoidance.

Disciplining a child often turns out to be a confusing and emotional experience. That’s why it’s helpful to keep the two goals of discipline firmly in mind. They can help you tell the difference between your need to guide your child’s behavior, and your need to blow off steam. If what you want to say or do with your child helps you achieve the goals of discipline, you can go ahead with confidence. If, after some consideration, you decide it will not, you can try another approach.

Some Ideas

Here are some ideas to help you discipline your child effectively:

1. Recognize the temptation to use violence (a temptation every parent faces) as a sign that you are feeling weak and helpless toward your child. You are at your wit’s end and don’t know what to do. Back off, cool off, and try something else. Violence only hurts. Sometimes it does physical damage. And remember that each blow dealt a child destroys dignity, self-respect, confidence and courage. It contributes to a lifelong sense of brutality and hatred that the child will have to struggle with for the rest of his or her life.

2. Remember why a child behaves: to feel good. Children of all ages have good feelings when parents recognize and reward their good behavior. Children old enough to have developed a conscience - perhaps around age seven, eight or nine - will be “good” because they’ve learned that they like themselves better when they do. So, you can complain to Johnny when he doesn’t help you

around the house, or punish him, or take away his privileges. But a pattern of telling him how helpful he is when he does help you will be much more effective in the long run.

3. Remember why a child misbehaves: to react to past or present hurts. A child with an emotional wound, like a child with a physical wound, becomes “swollen and inflamed” - with anger and fear. This is a natural reaction. Use your awareness of that original wound to help you be a compassionate and effective teacher when you discipline your child.

4. Encourage your child to talk about and express feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant. Don’t deny or diminish them, as in: “Oh, Johnny, a big boy like you isn’t afraid of the dark!” And let Susy know that it’s all right if she tells you how angry she is at you - of course, within reasonable limits. You set those limits - for example: she’s not to have it out with you in the grocery store, or when you’re feeding the baby, or by using physical violence or by insulting you. If you can help your child discover acceptable ways to express anger, then you will both have this to look forward to: loving feelings that will come when the mean and angry ones have been spent.

5. Show that you understand and respect the feelings behind your child’s misbehavior. “I can see how angry you are at me, Johnny, but I can’t let you kick me.” “No, Susy, I know you think that’s a very pretty vase, but I can’t let you play with it.” “I know how much you want a new ski jacket, but I really can’t let you buy it when the old one still fits and we need other things more.”

6. Set clear limits that you are prepared to enforce. Make certain your child understands them in advance. Feel free to change them, for example, when you think that Susy now has the coordination and judgment to ride her bicycle in the street, or that Johnny has been given privileges he can’t handle and they should be temporarily suspended. Then stick by your decision.